

Theology of Ordination – Position Two - Summary

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**Carl P. Cosaert, Ph.D.
Walla Walla University**

Good morning. It is a privilege for me to address you on an issue of great importance for our church—the question of the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. How we move forward on this subject is not only of the utmost importance for the unity of our church today, but I also believe it is just as important to the spread of the Three Angels' Message in the days to come.

To be honest, it is somewhat ironic that I am speaking to you in favor of the ordination of women—for I have not always been an advocate for this position.

In the earliest days of my ministry as a pastor, I was uncomfortable with the ordination of women. I was hesitant for two basic reasons:

First, I was concerned because I associated the push for women's ordination with those in the church who seemed, in my opinion, to have a more liberal agenda for the church and less concern for the authority of Scripture—a troubling pattern that seemed to already be at work in other denominations. As such, I worried that ordaining women was more of a concession to changing cultural norms than it was to the unchangeable norms of Scripture.

My second concern was that ordaining women also seemed opposed to a straightforward or plain reading of Scripture. After all, there were no women priests, no female apostles, and Paul said in 1 Timothy that a woman should not teach or exercise authority over a man. Paul even appeared to base his instructions on the established order of creation.

Over the last several years, my views have changed, however. The reason I have changed my opinion is not because I have backed away from the authority of Scripture, but because I believe I have read the Scriptures more closely.

While I remain concerned about the growing influence of cultural trends on the spiritual life of the church, I do not believe the ordination of women to the gospel ministry is a concession to cultural pressure.

Like my colleagues whose position I represent this morning, I believe that ordaining women is the right thing for us to do as a church for three reasons: (1) It is consistent with what the Scripture teach about the nature of the church in the New Testament; (2) It also affirms the way in which God ordered society when He created men and women in the very beginning; and (3) It is in harmony with what the Holy Spirit has already been doing in the church through the ministry of Ellen White, through female pastors, and also through the ministry of women who have been serving the church around the globe as local church elders since 1975.

1 – What does the Bible teach about the New Testament church?

When we turn to the church in the New Testament, we find an expansion and reordering of God's plan to redeem the world. The recognition that Jesus was, in fact, the promised Messiah, not just for the Jews, but also for all the Gentiles radically and forever changed the way the early Christians related to each other and also to the world. Over time the tribal, ethnic, and gender restrictions contained in the Levitical law gave way to a fuller understanding of the gospel that recognized in God's kingdom a true equality, for in His kingdom there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, and there is no male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). And so, whereas only the male descendants of Levi functioned as priests in God's temple in the Old Testament, the early church embraced the priesthood of all believers—not just Jewish men from any tribe, nor even the addition of male Gentiles, but also female believers. In the same way that the high priestly ministry of Jesus was far greater than that of any Jewish priest, so the spiritual ministry of men and women was also seen as greater than that of only the sons of Levi.

2 – Now you may ask, but does this mean that men and women are the same in everything?

Absolutely not! Equality in Christ and the priesthood of all believers does not mean that every man and woman perform the same roles or functions.

Listen to the word of the Lord...

"Now there are varieties of gifts...and there are varieties of service...and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone..."

"So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal..."

"All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills." (1 Cor 12:4-6; Rom 12:5-8; 1 Cor 12:7)

Scripture is clear. The gifts of the Spirit and the positions associated with them are not based on gender. They are based entirely on the discretion of the Holy Spirit and are distributed freely to both men and women.

3 – You may ask, "If the gifts of the Spirit are not based on gender, why then does Paul say in 1 Timothy that a woman should not teach or exercise authority over a man?"

Paul does prohibit the women in 1 Timothy from teaching, but the reason is not because of their gender. The reason for his injunction is because the believing women in Ephesus had become involved with the false teachers who were destroying the work of God.

A plain reading of the entire passage, not just this single verse, makes this clear. Listen to what Paul says to Timothy at the very beginning of the letter.

"As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine,⁴ nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith." 1 Tim. 1:3-4

Timothy was to remain in Ephesus for one purpose—to protect the church from certain individuals who were teaching a different gospel. In addition to condemning the false teachers and their "irreverent babble" in chapters 4 and 6, in chapter 5 Paul also connects the practice of the women in the church with the spread of a false gospel when he describes some of them as having "strayed after Satan" and he chastises others for "going about from house to house...saying what they should not" (1 Tim 5:15, 13).

So when Paul says the women in Ephesus should not teach, he does so as part of his overall concern to silence the individuals in the church who were not teaching the truth. The women he prohibits are part of that group. They needed to learn the true gospel before they were qualified to serve as teachers. Paul's prohibition was, therefore, a temporary and local response to the specific situation in Ephesus.

To claim that Paul's counsel prohibits all women at all times from forever serving as teachers and leaders within the church disregards a plain reading of all the other passages in the New Testament where Paul affirms the role of women leading out in the church, women like Euodia and Syntyche who Paul says "labored side by side" with him as colleagues in proclaiming the "gospel" (Phil 4:2-3), or the woman Phoebe who Paul identifies in Romans 16 as a deacon in the church of Cenchrae.

This is not to say that Paul's counsel in 1 Timothy doesn't apply to us today. It does. Scripture always has a universal and timeless application for the church. The application, however, has to be to a similar situation within the church—in other words, to situations where false teachers—whether women or men—need to be silenced because they are undermining the proclamation of the gospel.

4 – You may ask, "Why then does Paul support his prohibition against the women in Ephesus from teaching by appealing to the creation of Adam before Eve and identifying the woman as the one who was deceived and became a transgressor."

Paul's reference to Eve was intended to serve as a vivid warning to the women in Ephesus of the danger of listening to the false teachers and being influenced by them. The story of Eve's involvement in the fall illustrated in the strongest terms just how dangerous it was to listen to false teachings. Paul also refers to the deception of Eve when warning against false teachers in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4.

5 – But why then does Paul refer to the creation order?

The reason Paul emphasizes the creation order is because he is trying to correct the manner in which the women in Ephesus were seeking to carry out their teaching authority. When the Bible says a woman should not teach or "exercise authority" the word translated as "exercise authority" is not the typical word used for authority. It means "to control," "to rule over," or to try to "dominate." It indicates that the women in Ephesus were exercising authority in a domineering manner that reflected negatively upon the men in the congregation and, in particular, their

husbands. Paul appeals to the creation account to remind them that women were not created to domineer over men, but that in the same way that Eve was created to be Adam's equal partner, the women in Ephesus should treat men with the respect required of an equal.

Those who argue against women's ordination interpret this passage just the opposite way—they claim it means that men have the authority within the church to rule over women. But that sort of interpretation goes against a plain reading of the way God ordered the relationship of men and women in creation.

The Bible teaches in Genesis that God created men and women as equals and that neither one of them was placed under the authority of the other.

We are told in Genesis that, "God created humankind in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female He created them (Gen 1:27). Outside of their biological differences, God did not establish any stereotypical roles that constituted the "essence" of what it meant to be a man or a woman. Instead, Adam and Eve were created as equals who were united together in the same sort of mutual submission that is expressed in the Godhead itself. Rather than assigning to them certain predetermined or arbitrary roles based on their gender, God gave them the freedom to develop the gifts He gave them to fulfill the various responsibilities associated with them. And it was through the use of those abilities that God intended not only Adam and Eve, but also every man and every woman to fulfill the divine charge to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to exercise dominion over all the other creatures (Gen 1:27–28).

The fact that Adam was created before the women does not suggest that Adam had authority over her. The entire story of creation is a movement from incompleteness to completeness. The creation of Adam first merely indicates that the creation of humankind was not yet complete—God was still at work. To argue that what is created first is superior would suggest that the birds and the animals were superior to the human race. The equality of men and women united together in mutual submission is most clearly represented in the fact that God created Eve from Adam's side—not his head or foot—to show that she was, as Ellen White says, to "stand by his side as an equal."¹ It is this equality in the creation order that Paul refers to when rebuking the domineering women in Ephesus.

Paul also appeals to the creation order in 1 Corinthians 11 when addressing the behavior of the believing women in Corinth. Like the church in Ephesus, the women in Corinth were acting in a way that was bringing dishonor to their husbands—in their case, they had stopped wearing the traditional head covering when leading out in public worship.

Although there was nothing intrinsically wrong with not covering their heads, it was a problem culturally. A woman who did not cover her head in public in the Greco-Roman world was seen as immodest, since uncovered hair was often the sign of a prostitute. As such, these women were bringing shame upon the reputation of their husbands, and also causing a distraction during worship.

¹ Patriarchs and Prophets, 47.

In appealing to these women to change their ways, Paul argues that what they do with their literal head has huge implications for their metaphorical head—that is their husbands. Paul argues that although the woman was created as man's equal partner, the fact that the first woman was created from Adam's side indicates that a wife brings glory and honor to her husband because she is a reflection of him. The behavior of these women, however, was doing just the opposite. Rather than shame their husbands, they are to cover their heads to bring honor to them, and also to make sure that all the honor and glory during worship is given to God, not to any man.

But it is important to note that Paul does not stop there. He also says in 1 Cor 11:11-12, "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman." In other words, the honor in marriage of which Paul speaks is not a one-way street. Neither the husband nor the wife should do anything that would undermine the reputation of the other or damage the influence of the gospel.

A plain reading of the passage reveals that Paul is not speaking about church leadership and authority, or ordination. He is talking about the way women should relate to their husbands. The passage says nothing about the headship of all men over all women. If anything, the passage affirms not only the right of women to pray in public, but also to prophesy, which is a form of teaching.

Like the creation account itself, Paul's references to the creation order in 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Corinthians 11 leave open the possibility for women to exercise authority and to hold positions of leadership within the church. In fact, not only do we find examples of women exercising the spiritual gift of leadership in the New Testament, but also in the Old Testament. We have examples of Miriam, a noted prophet and leader along side her brothers Moses and Aaron (Mic 6:4), the prophet Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14-20; 2 Chr 34:22-28), and Deborah, who functioned not only as a prophet, but also as a judge exercising authority over both men and women. All of these examples demonstrate that there is nothing morally or spiritually wrong with women serving in leadership roles among God's people.

6 – If that is the case, why then does Paul say that in order to serve as an overseer or elder within the church that the individual must be the husband of one wife? Doesn't that exclude women from serving in a leadership role in the church?

No, I do not think it does. The phrase translated a "husband of one wife" in Greek literally means a "one-woman man." This expression not only applies to overseers and elders, but also as one of the qualifications for deacons later in the chapter. While those who argue against ordaining women see this verse as conclusive evidence that women are to be excluded from exercising authority in the church, the earliest Christians did not see it that way. While the expression is gender specific, early Christians did not believe it was gender exclusive.

We can see this in the fact that although Paul says a deacon must be a "one-woman man," women still served in the early church as deacons. We know, for example, from Romans 16 that a woman named Phoebe served the church in Cenchrae in the official capacity as a deacon—and we know of many more women who served as deacons in the early church. What is significant is that the requirement that a deacon be a "one-woman man" was not seen as an obstacle to the ministry of female deacons. The earliest Christians clearly understood the expression a "one-woman man" as a reference to the importance of sexual purity, which was understood in a

monogamous relationship between a man and a woman. The passage no more excludes women from ministry than it does single or childless men from serving the church as overseers.

Like the Bible, Ellen G. White also does not explicitly prohibit the ordination of women to ministry. In both what she said and what she did, Ellen White encouraged women to study and develop their God-given gifts so they might serve the church in positions of leadership. As a woman, Ellen White certainly taught and exercised authority over both men and women.

In conclusion, I believe that the only position that is truly consistent with Scripture, the doctrine of the church, and that truly promotes the unity of the church is allowing for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. This view is not opposed to Scripture, nor does it have to be rationalized as an accommodation or modification of a so-called universal pattern of male headship over all women. There is no command forbidding it. It is consistent with the teachings of the Bible and the fundamental beliefs of Adventism. It promotes the mission and unity of the church, and it is in harmony with the way in which the Spirit has guided this church thorough the ministry of Ellen White, and with what the Holy Spirit has already been doing in the church through the ministry of female pastors. On this basis, we would recommend that the world church allow for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry.

On this basis, we would recommend that the church allow for the ordination of women to the gospel ministry in those areas of the world church that are comfortable with it.